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ITALIAN INTEREST IN A LITTLE KNOWN  
FIBROUS ETHIOPIAN PLANT

By: American Consul

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As everyone known, keen interest is taken by Italy in any discoveries or experiments that suggest even a remote possibility of furnishing raw materials which might be turned to account in connection with Italian striving for a high degree of economic self-sufficiency. For this reason, quite a little has been written recently with regard to a fibrous plant growing in Abyssinia designated as an urtica of some kind. The substance of what has been seen in this subject is condensed below.

About the commencement of the Abyssinian campaign a Dr. Edgardo Tashjean, a specialist in tropical plants (attached to the Royal Experimental Station of the Paper and Textile Fibres Industry) came across a spontaneous fibrous plant while at or near Djibouti. Later he investigated it in the course of a scientific expedition in Abyssinia - particularly the northern part.

According to Dr. Tashjean, as reported in the July issue of "L'Agricoltura Coloniale", the plant is the "Urtica simensis Hochst" or a closely allied variety. It reaches a height of two meters, without branches, and has heart-shaped leaves which are sometimes as large as a large fig leaf. The trunk or stem is hairy and from 3 to 4 centimeters in diameter. In the dry stage the leaves fall and the stem becomes fairly smooth. There are two kinds of "hairs" on the leaves: small prickly ones and long spiny ones - the latter much fewer.

When the plant reaches maturity it dries out, the leaves fall and 6 or 8 fruits are found at the end of

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the stem - each containing seeds resembling small lentils. Apparently the properties of the seeds are not yet known.

The vegetable is found principally in regions having a mild climate and damp subsoil and opinions seem to agree that it could grow and develop in all parts of Italy and the colonies where there is abundant rainfall and mild winter weather.

Messrs. Emilio Debenedetti and Francesco Pancirolli also published an account of experiments made with the plant in question (Bulletin of the Royal Experimental Station referred to above: April, 1937). Their observations are, in résumé:

1) The outer skin shows a close anatomical and chemical analogy to the ramie: from which it seems to be distinguishable because of a greater development of the constituent tissues.

2) The extractable fiber is very strong but its diameter is much greater than that of the ramie. Chemically, it should be classified among the pecto-celluloses. By treating it by the method used with ramie (extraction of the sticky sap and sun-drying), the result was a very strong fibre, clean with a good degree of whiteness, rather rough and coarse.

3) A micro-biological method of getting rid of the sap was also experimented with by the application of "felsinozima B" and "ordinary felsinozima" - which terms mean nothing to the writer but may to a chemist. The results are said to be better in some respects but less usable fibre was obtained, the desapping was less thorough and the fibre was not as strong.

4) Whether the utilization and cultivation of the plant is economically practical, it is too early to say. There are not enough thoroughly established facts as yet to form the basis of definite conclusion. Like so many other things with regard to Ethiopian resources, long and careful research and experiment on the ground, followed by practical tests in industry, must be left to tell the tale.

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Information sources:

Indicated in the text.

Five copies to the Department of State.  
One copy to the Commercial Attaché, Rome.

Central File: Decimal File 865D.6132, Internal Affairs Of States, Agriculture., Field Crops. Seeds., Italian East Africa, Fibers., no date. n.d. MS European Colonialism in the Early 20th Century. National Archives (United States). Archives Unbound, [link.gale.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FSC5109727743%2FGDSC%3Fu%3Domni%26sid%3Dbookmark-GDSC](https://link.gale.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FSC5109727743%2FGDSC%3Fu%3Domni%26sid%3Dbookmark-GDSC). Accessed 18 June 2025.